



Un'Estate Toscana : A Tuscan Summer



STEP

SECOND-YEAR TRANSFORMATIONAL
EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

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What did you learn?

I learned to...

1. Always take a lap around the outdoor market before making purchases
2. Never eat food that is sold in the piazza, those are tourist traps
3. Always schedule at least two hours for dinner
4. Don't wear your contrada's flag in rival territory
5. Never expect the buses to come on time, or at all
6. Don't be afraid to try to speak Italian, everyone appreciates the effort
7. And know language barriers can't interfere with friendships

Life in Siena taught me to slow down and appreciate the little things, as cliché as that may sound. Life in Italy moves at a very different pace than it does here, and people don't seem to abide by strict schedules or deadlines. We savored every meal, relished in every conversation, and spent more time relaxing in the company of others than I ever have. My host mom taught me that you can be accomplished and successful without loading yourself with stress. Peace of mind is so crucial, and I have never felt more at peace than I did during those 4 weeks in Siena.



What was your favorite part of your experience?

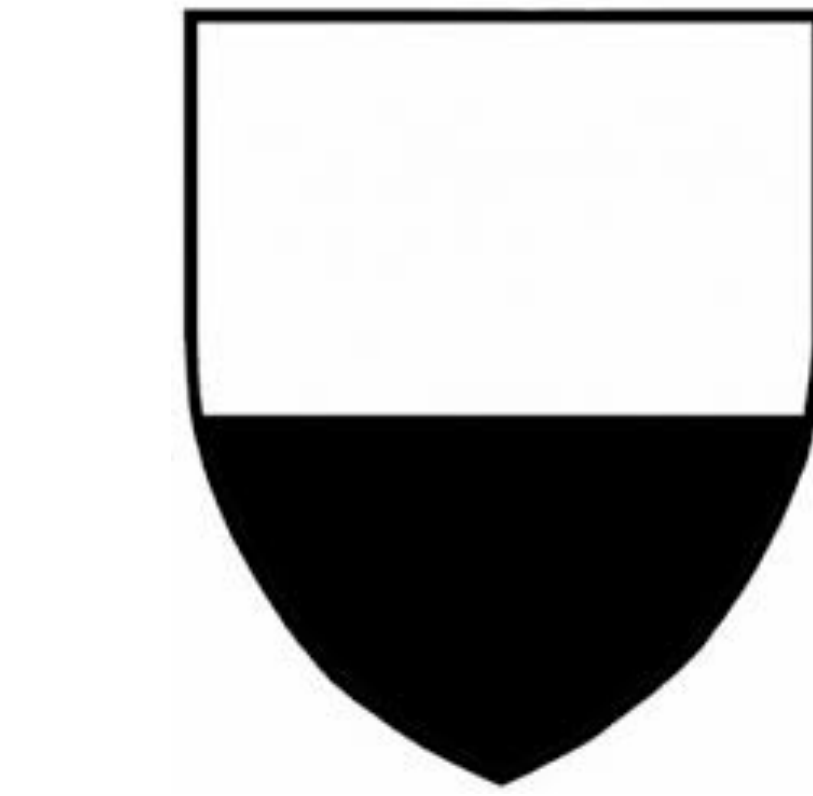
My favorite part of my program was getting to know the people that I encountered, people that, without this experience, I would have never crossed paths with. The students that shared the experience with me were just as eager as I was to explore the culture and dive head first into the Italian lifestyle. We had similar passions and goals, leading us to travel together and see incredible places. We all made a collective effort to be present, enjoy the now, and savor every second together knowing that our 4 short weeks together would fly by. However, it wasn't just the students in the program that I connected with, but my professors, my host family, and other locals that I happened to strike up a conversation with. I jumped at every opportunity to have a conversation in Italian, and for that reason I had so many incredible interactions with people in the most random of places, from storefronts to beaches to trains, and even the Siena streets when I needed help with directions. These people all had a different story, and I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time to get a little look into their experiences all across this beautiful country.



Through STEP funds, I was able to pursue my Italian minor abroad in Siena, a small city in the Tuscan region of Italy. I chose to apply to Siena Italian Studies' month-long program for many obvious reasons— **affordable cost, credit hours**, a summer in ITALY. Easy math. And still, what I got out of this program was worth more than any fee I could have paid. Each day, we spent around 4 hours in the classroom, but many of those hours were spent on fieldtrips to **museums** or around the city. There was also a **service component** of our program, and each student was able to choose a service opportunity that fit their interests, such as volunteer at a cat shelter, teach English at an afterschool camp, or assist the local first-response medical team. All **meals were included** in the program, and either cooked fresh by our generous **host families**, or made at one of the two amazing restaurants on our quaint campus directly inside the city walls. On the weekends, we had the **opportunity to travel**, and I was able to see places such as Cinque Terre, Rome, Venice, Florence, the Italian Alps, and Pisa. We had the opportunity to become very familiar with the town of Siena, and even were able to witness the 800-year-old tradition of **Palio**, the horse race held in downtown Siena that the city is known for, where each neighborhood is represented.



<http://theborgias.wikifoundry.com/photo/11514279/Republic+of+Siena+-+Map>



How did this experience impact you personally?

When choosing which study abroad programs to apply to, the most valuable aspect of Siena's program for me was the hosted living component. I knew I wanted to live with a host family because I was eager to be faced with the challenge of having to speak Italian out of necessity 24/7. Needless to say, my host-family experience was something I wouldn't trade for the world. My host mother, Lucia, spoke very little English (and my Italian wasn't much better), yet we connected immediately through our laughter had over the challenge of a language barrier. She took me in as she would her own daughter, and I felt her love from day one, even if she couldn't explicitly state it to me. Through her, I gained greater confidence in both my Italian and who I am as a person, all because she saw the value in me, and did whatever it took to see that I got the most out of this experience. I consider Lucia to be a true mother to me, and to this day, we stay in close contact. I feel so lucky to have family across the globe, and now I know I am welcome to return at any time.



How did your experience impact your academic, personal, and life goals moving forward?

My main goal of this trip was to grow closer to Italian fluency. Although I still cannot say that I am fluent (I've realized that mastering a language is a life-long effort), I gained far greater confidence in my Italian skills and no longer fear striking up a conversation or having to say "non ho capito" or "I don't understand". I gained a greater understanding and appreciation of my heritage and the place that my relatives called home, and feel as I am much more connected to my ancestry. I also feel that, beyond my Italian capabilities, I've gained a greater confidence in who I am as a person. With the help of STEP, I was able to fund the rest of my trip on my own, an accomplishment that I never thought I would be able to say at this age. I got myself to Italy and gathered lifelong memories as a result of my hard work and dedication to further Italian education. I met new people, tried new things, and traveled independently, which required me to depend fully on myself and trust that I would be able to navigate through new places and new relationships. After Siena, my desire to become fluent in Italian has only grown stronger, and I have plans to return soon to visit with old friends and once again apply my Italian, knowing that my skills will only get better with practice!

